

Fusing the Love of Wisdom with the Dwelling Place or Home in the Classroom: A Rhizomic Journey

Over the past two decades in my role as a teacher, not once did I feel the urge to take a child home and give him/her a better existence than what s/he had. Often, when I heard colleagues make this declaration toward a student they felt was living in conditions they deemed as below their own socio/economic/cultural norm, I used to think I lacked a maternal instinct. Why did I not feel the need to take that child home, too, and give him/her a better life?

After embarking on a self-study¹ researching how I can improve my teaching and learning practice, I immersed myself in the process of deconstructing a selection of lived experiences so I could arrive at a deeper understanding of my penchant for teaching holistically. One of the more poignant realizations I unveiled, was that it wasn't that I didn't care about children who lived in different circumstances than my own; in fact it was quite the opposite. What I desired for children was for them to learn how to live and grow within their own socio/economic/cultural milieu and progress through their life with the knowledge that they can set their sights on a life that they can work towards, just like many of us envision for ourselves. I believe that if a child learns to navigate *with* his/her life in this way, s/he can move through a life just waiting for him/her. I believe my role, as an educator in a young person's life, is to instill this belief. I attempted to accomplish this by providing opportunities for young people to learn within a holistic teaching and learning environment where an individual's mind, body, and spirit were equally nourished. This can only become a reality within the dwelling place or home of a classroom, where a community of teachers and learners is encouraged to exist.

Creating a classroom milieu where building community, while fostering a sense of belonging as a pedagogical ethic, is not an easy path to travel in this educational age of accountability and standardization. However, for me it is an ontological necessity. It is not that I do not set high standards for my students, I do, but I have aspirations for students to learn in relation to their own lived experiences so that the knowledge they consider as meaningful is such that multiple possibilities are unveiled. Their task is to discern whether and when to act on their newfound knowledge. In this paper, I consider how the notions of ecosophy, specifically "as fusing the love of wisdom with the

¹ See Hilary Brown, 2010. *I Must Walk Through the Gate: An Ontological Necessity*. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation. Faculty of Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON.

dwelling place or home”² have been played out in the classrooms where I was both a teacher and a learner. I have selected what may appear as three different illustrations of how I have attempted to build community and foster a sense of belonging in our dwelling place or home in the classroom, but it is my intention to show how each experience connects rhizomatically. The horizontal movement inside this type of learning environment does not lead to an order of sameness (everyone at the same cognitive level and/or ability) but rather to the instability of difference.³ This rubs up against the political climate of standardization. However, within this difference are the “rhizomatic representations of intuiting deep ecology in an educational milieu.”⁴

I begin with a story I wrote during the data generation phase of my doctoral work and follow with a descriptive piece I wrote during my Master of Education. Both stories are set in an elementary school classroom. I conclude with an experiential description of a Trance Dance ceremony written just prior to embarking on a Vision Quest. This transformational experience provided me with the vision to extend, connect, and provide experiences beyond the four walls of the classroom and reach out to an entire school community. At the end of each story, I briefly interpret its meaning in light of the notions of ecosophy. In the closing stages of the paper, I trace my path through the thick rhizomes illustrating how the horizontal movement guided my journey along a path which enabled me to connect these three educational experiences and feed my ontological need to build community, while fostering a sense of belonging. This became an essential process so that each member of our community could cultivate their own ecological wisdom so that s/he could navigate a life s/he envisioned for him/herself.

A Dwelling Place called Home

“What you do in the classroom won’t matter to the kids. All they will remember will be extracurricular, the trips, the spirit days, and the teams they played on,” he insisted, “so don’t take what happens in your classroom so seriously.” Without a word, I turned around and walked away. A rebuttal wasn’t going to change my Principal’s mind. As long as our school was competitive and won pennants in cross country, volleyball, and basketball,

² *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* Call for Papers description.

³ See Gilles Deleuze. 1994/1969. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton, London: The Althone Press.

⁴ *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* Call for Papers description.

then “we” were considered a successful school. I knew the importance of athletics and how they helped to shape who I am. But I also knew that it wasn't to the exclusion of everything else that happened in school. I saved my energy for people who I knew would need it, the children in my classroom

As I slowly mounted the stairs to the second floor, I pondered how someone in his position, a leader in the school, could be so jaded about a child's academic learning. “I guess he has no idea how engaging learning could be,” I thought to myself. I unlocked the door and entered my classroom. Colour sang out from every part of the room; hands-on models were scattered across the back counter, pieces of published writing were hung on the wall, kids' advertisements for imaginary products were displayed, symbolic reading projects were hanging on coat hangers from the ceiling. A celebration of imagination, creativity, and community was evident in every corner of the room. I was home.

I lowered myself to my chair and gazed out the window. I am fortunate to look out onto a slice of forest that was left over from the recent destruction that ripped through Burlington. The 407. This stand of trees has many indigenous species that grow in southern Ontario. It is unique, just like the students I teach. They all have distinct needs and requirements that need much attention in order for them to develop and grow into the people they are meant to become. They need to grow deep roots that will provide a solid foundation for present and future growth. These roots will provide a constant flow of nourishment to the rest of their body, mind, and spirit. Whether they are an oak, a shag-bark hickory, a birch, an elm, or a red maple. I must attempt to offer them what they need, their root requirements. Maybe it is an opportunity to design and build a kinesthetic product or present a dramatic piece they've written, directed, and maybe even starred in? Maybe they will write music, perhaps anthems accompanied by lyrics for their country project, or design and create a flag for their country? Maybe poetry is their calling, or how about graphing and analyzing data for an upcoming fundraiser after initiating a school poll? The bell sounds, indicating the students' imminent arrival.

I awaken from my solitary reverie in time to gather my final thoughts. Choice, teaching holistically, and encouragement are the necessary requirements for deep root growth. We are part of this ecosystem together, striving for balance and interconnectedness. As the children start to trickle in, I take one more glance out the window. Autumn is upon us, and the vibrant colours of the leaves shimmer in the sunshine. I feel so fortunate to be a part of their root development. “Hey, Mrs. Brown, what will we be doing this afternoon?” Sarah asks enthusiastically. I pondered for a moment.

"Let's go for a walk in the forest," I suggest. "Did you know that every indigenous species from southern Ontario resides in our forest?" My role is an important one, one that I believe will matter.

This story depicts a layering of instability of difference. In the first layer, the difference is exposed between an educator who imagines a learning space filled with choice, a variety of learning modalities to meet the diverse needs of each learner, and an appreciation for the natural world outside the four walls of her classroom. This instability of difference is in relation to an educator who wants to win at all cost and where the hierarchical intent is to become number one. However, in the second layer, the story also depicts instability of difference between a teacher and her students who work towards a "wisdom encountered via harmonious equilibrium where one realizes his or her full potential and acts in a socially responsive and responsible way."⁵ Both layers of instability of difference are equally important and cannot and should not go unnoticed for we live in a world where difference is always present. It is how we negotiate this instability of difference, that I believe has the greatest impact on the people we teach and learn alongside and on ourselves.

The Context

The confining four walls of a classroom can be transformed into a place of mystery with a bit of creativity and imagination on the part of the teacher. Such was the case with the six sessions that were going to define my research into what nourishes the adolescent spirit in the classroom. The desks were pushed back against three walls, opening up a wide expanse of hard, tiled flooring. The throwing of blankets, small rugs, and pillows around the perimeter of the open space softened the area. The curtains were drawn and the lights were turned off, creating a mysterious atmosphere of wonder. The class of 30 students trickled in after recess. Without instruction, they immediately took off their shoes as they nervously whispered to one another while they found their spot in the circle. There was an uncertainty that one feels only when something unequaled is about to occur. You could taste the excitement in the air. Some students were sitting, some were lying down with their hands cradling their chins, and others were stretched out resting their heads on their folded arms, anticipating what was to come next.

I lit the candle housed in the clear glass holder and placed it in the middle of the floor. This called the Council Meeting to order without any words, just a symbol of light. I held piece of soapstone in my hands, which let the group know that it was their turn to listen and listen deeply to each other. I

⁵ *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* Call for Papers description.

dedicated the council meeting to honesty and the friendships that come when we tell the truth. As I slowly started to read their questions aloud, I could feel the intensity of 30 pairs of eyes gazing in my direction, even though my own pair was focused on the page in front of me, and so began the opening of the gateways to our spirit.

The Context is a descriptive piece that illustrates how I transformed the physical context of my classroom when I initiated the sessions that would not only define my Master of Education⁶ research, but also infuse the love of wisdom with the dwelling place or home in our classroom. The aesthetic quality of pillows, blankets, rugs, and candlelight softening the hard tile floors was an unexpected moment for both my students and myself. I did not anticipate their reaction when they entered the space after their recess break. The sound of quieted voices, the unprompted removal of shoes, and their attentive gazes brought notions of affection, adoration, and devotion to *this* experience. Our classroom became a dwelling place where nourishing the spirit came to life through an embodied knowing. This intrapersonal⁷ curriculum transformed my teaching and learning practice into one that “involves everything from self-reflection to emotional regulation, from imaginative expression to empathetic understanding.”⁸ Since this inaugural session in 2002, I have continued to infuse my teaching and learning practice with the Council Meeting process.⁹ Throughout this process the conception of ecosophy was being realized within our classroom community but at the time I did not have a name for this type of pedagogy. I do now.

Masculine/Feminine Energy

I can feel myself surrender to the rhythms, and the grammar of my own body as I release my embodied self into an ecstatic dance fueled by the drumming and rattling of my Vision Quest guides who occupy the outer circle. I am fully

⁶ See Hilary Brown, 2002. *What Nourishes the Spirit of the Adolescents in the Classroom? A Qualitative Study into the Gateways of Adolescents' Souls*. Unpublished Master's thesis. Faculty of Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON.

⁷ See Rachael Kessler, 2000. *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character in School*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

⁸ Hart, Tobin. 2009, p. 6.

⁹ Kessler, Rachael. 2000.

engaged in one of the three inner circles reserved for the feminine trance dance. I am moving swaying my hips to and fro and Jay and Alan. As I slowly exaggerate my hip movements left and right allowing the movement of my arms to flow right out to the tips of my fingers, I am able to accentuate the feminine feel of this storytelling dance. The beat of the drum and the jangling sound of the rattle keeps a steady rhythm that flows through my body and allows me to express myself like I never have before.

There is an intense darkness surrounding me, the kind I experience only when I am up north, miles away from the glare of the city lights. The stars have taken over the night sky in a brilliant array of constellations with intermittent visits from bolts of lightning. As each one sporadically flashes across the sky, it adds to the intensity of my experience as I feel myself conjoin with an invisible presence inside myself.

My fellow questers are engaged in the same ceremony. Just outside of the feminine circle is the circle reserved for masculine trance dance movements. Deanna, Kay, and Laurel faced straight on in a sun wise direction and move in an exaggerated running posture. They are standing very erect with their arms bent at 90 degrees, one forward one back, with their palms facing in towards each other and their fingers held tightly together. They keep this posture through the whole movement. The dancers lift their knees higher than normal throughout the dance enhancing its masculine feel. When I tire of the feminine circle I move to my home in the masculine ring, moving with ease in line with the other women as I make my way around the four directions illuminated by candle lanterns in the north, south, east and west. The inner circle is reserved for the deepest trance dances and interactions. Here I am encouraged to perform any kind of ritualistic or free flowing dance along with the wild beings of nature who were ritually invited by name, at the outset, to join our dance. I never make it to the inner circle. I never feel the call.

Most of my time is spent in the feminine circle searching for a comfortable rhythm. As I move beyond my ordinary ego state I allow my body to discover what my soul had to say through improvisation. Even though there is a distinct feminine dance, I let the movements take on a life of their own. Each move unlike anything I have ever done. I try to maintain my presence in this ring but feel the constant pull toward the masculine circle.

I don't know how much time passes as I allow my body the freedom to feel the energy created by my own rhythms. I simply let the energy move through me until there is nothing more to express bringing the rhythm to a silent halt. At the end of this ceremony we leave in complete silence. Not a word is uttered as we make our way back to base camp fifteen minutes away. The

glow from the lanterns cast a flickering light across the forest that is positioned on each side of the well-worn path. I focus my gaze straight ahead and imitate the footprints in front of me leaving a matching impression upon the earth's surface. I can still hear the beat of the drum throughout my body. It isn't fading. Once at Base Camp I roll out my sleeping bag and wiggle my way into the silky cocoon and immediately fall sleep.

The Trance Dance was just one of many ceremonies I underwent during my Vision Quest¹⁰ experience in the summer of 2005. When I entered each ceremony I was met with a unique first time encounter. There was no preconceived notion prior to each experience; I simply entered each encounter with an open heart and a willingness to receive whatever knowledge I was intended to receive. I was out of my comfort zone, but ready and willing to let go. This openness, I believe, is what guides me on my pursuit to continually improve my teaching and learning practice, and in this pursuit, I am continually trying to find ways to build community and foster a sense of belonging. So what does this particular experience have to do with the fusing of love and wisdom with the dwelling place or home in the classroom and beyond?

When I entered the 2005/06 school year, I was introduced to my new administrator. Being new to the school she set out to familiarize herself with the culture of the school community. After completing a number of focus groups with groups of students from grades one through eight, she called me to her office. She asked me to acquaint her with the Council Meeting process since many of the grade 8 students had mentioned its impact on them during the focus group sessions. After explaining the process to her, she turned to me and asked, "Do you have any suggestions as to how we can we build community with the whole school?" Unbeknownst to her, I had had a vision of a loon, amongst other creatures, during my four-day solo fast and as a result of that vision I had been in contact with a conceptual artist from Oregon who creates Art for the Sky.¹¹ Daniel Dancer travels to schools and completes a weeklong residency culminating in an Art for the Sky project whereby every member of the school community becomes a human paint drop and creates something greater than them self. I pitched the idea of creating a loon to my administrator and she loved the notion of this creative collaboration where no one contribution was greater than any other person's. Once again, as in the first story, wisdom was encountered via harmonious

¹⁰ See Bill Plotkin, 2003. *Soulcraft: Crossing Into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche*. Novato, CA: New World Library.

¹¹ Art for the Sky web site <http://www.inconcertwithnature.com/default.htm>

equilibrium. Even though our loon creation appeared cohesive (after all it looked like a loon from the sky) it did not lead to an order of sameness from the ground when we were all on our hands and knees acting as human paint drops, but rather we surrendered to the instability of difference. How did we manage this instability of difference?

Daniel Dancer taught us five teachings when he came to our school. First, *sky sight* where training our imaginations to awaken our sky sight could lead us to rise above our problems and see the “Big Picture.” By embodying a loon, we could begin to learn to see through the eyes of this being. Second was *collaboration* where we were given the opportunity to succeed together as one in the creation of something magnificent. Three, *the giveaway*, where participants were encouraged to view this fleeting art in the indigenous tradition of “The Giveaway”, a gift from hundreds of hearts, from Earth to Sky, honoring all the blessings of life on Earth. The experience of *being* the loon art and then releasing it is a model of gratitude that lasts a lifetime. Four, art that leaves no trace is a lesson in *impermanence*, we begin to understand that nothing lasts and that everything is always changing and we must appreciate each moment as precious. The final teaching was *connection*. There comes a time in life when we realize we are a very small part of something immense and beautiful. Art for the Sky is such an experience where participants discover “bodily”, that we are indeed all connected as one. In our loon creation, everyone was of equal importance and vital to the whole. A perfect metaphor for how nature works.

In June 2006, 750 students, teachers, custodians, secretaries, parents and administrators collaboratively created Loon ~ Sky ~ Lake.¹² It was an embodied experience that brought together an entire school community without classification of division, grade, gender, and/or position within the school. I believe that it is through Dancer’s teachings, and the experience of our final loon creation in and of itself, where we began to negotiate our instability of difference. This encounter inspired our school community to continue to seek ecological wisdom. Our dwelling place, called home, had shifted from individual classrooms to encompass the entire school community.

Shortly after this event, a colleague whose son attended kindergarten that year in our school stopped me in the hall and playfully remarked. “Thanks a lot Hilary, now Stephen says we should not take our boat out on the lake this summer because we could leak gas!” I smiled knowing that perhaps the social change we created space for, in this dwelling place or home called school, could occur and could perhaps carry on through our next generation

¹² Loon~Sky~Lake <http://www.inconcertwithnature.com/htm/skygallery.htm>

of students.

Three different stories depict a rhizomic or horizontal journey over a five-year period in my teaching career. Not that time is of consequence in this unfolding, but I want to call attention to the fact that these stories did not take place one after the other in rapid sequence, but rather they occurred much like the formation of underground rhizomes. Rhizomes take time to thicken and mature as they move horizontally underground before sending shoots to the surface. The horizontal nature of my teaching and learning journey is of importance as it grounds me in a hierarchical journey that emerges out of difference. I am a teacher who in spite of the political climate has managed to find the strength and courage to set myself apart from the mainstream. I have worked with administrators who do not value the type of environment I attempt cultivate and I have worked with administrators who recognize how important building community is and who want to grow that phenomenon outside of the classroom and allow it to permeate through the entire school community. I have worked with students who have flourished in this type of environment and students who have remained in what appeared as unaffected in this type of milieu. Whatever the outcome, in each situation the type of environment that was created did not lead to an order of sameness, but rather it accentuated the instability of difference. It is within this difference that shoots were able to emerge from underground and penetrate the surface opening to diverse possibilities for us to explore independently and in community with one another.

Throughout my teaching and learning career, there have been times when I have been able to encourage the rhizomes to shoot up from the root. When I was successful, my ontological need to build community, while fostering a sense of belonging in our dwelling place or home in the classroom and, at times, the entire school, was satisfied. As I continue my horizontal journey, I hope to continue to make a difference in the lives of the students I work alongside so that they can learn how to live and grow within their own milieu. It is my sincere hope that s/he will navigate *with* his/her life and work toward any aspirations s/he has until s/he realizes his/her goals. With a teacher as his/her guide, fusing the love of wisdom with the dwelling place or home in classroom by building community, can perhaps bring about this internal belief in one's self. I am aware that anything can happen as I wait for the mystery to unfold. I live, teach, and learn within an instability of difference. In this way, I am living from moment to moment, open to creative and diverse learning opportunities and the endless possibilities that lie within. That is, I am continually learning as I continue to encourage the rhizomes to shoot up from the root.

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